DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 257 919 UD 024 279

AUTHOR McLanahan, Sara S.
TITLE Single Mothers and Psychological Well-Being: A Test of the Stress and Vulnerability Hypotheses.
INSTITUTION National Inst. of Child Health and Human Development (NIH), Bethesda, Md.; Wisconsin Univ., Madison. Center for Demography and Ecology.
SPONS AGENCY Wisconsin State Dept. of Health and Social Services, Madison.
PUB DATE Oct 84
GRANT FDC-25-274; HD05876
NOTE 27p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Depression (Psychology); Family Financial Resources; *Family Income; Family Status; Family Structure; Fatherless Family; Low Income Groups; *Mental Health; *Mothers; *One Parent Family; Physical Health; Psychological Characteristics; Stress Management; *Stress Variables; Unemployment

ABSTRACT

Recent studies indicate that single mothers experience unusually high levels of psychological distress. The purpose of this paper is to compare rival explanations for these high levels. Four hypotheses are tested: (1) the psychological well-being of single mothers, relative to married parents, declines over time; (2) changes in psychological status are related to the incidence and prevalence of life events and chronic strain; (3) single mothers respond more negatively to life events and strain than married parents; and (4) greater exposure to stressful events and chronic strain can account for the relative decline in psychological well-being among single mothers over time. Longitudinal data taken from the Michigan Panel Study of Income Dynamics are used to test each of these hypotheses. The results indicate that the high level of distress among single mothers is due primarily to the ongoing strain associated with low income. This conclusion suggests that policies aimed at raising the income of single mothers would not only improve conditions for children in single parent households but would also enhance the mental health of single mothers. (RDN)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED257919

Center For Demography And Ecology
University of Wisconsin-Madison

SINGLE MOTHERS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING: A TEST OF THE STRESS AND VULNERABILITY HYPOTHESES

Sara S. McLanahan

CDE Working Paper 84-40

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Sara McLanahan
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

UD024279

Single Mothers and Psychological Well-Being:

A Test of the Stress and Vulnerability Hypotheses

Sara S. McLanahan
University of Wisconsin-Madison

October 1984

This research was supported by the Institute for Research on Poverty through funds provided by the Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services, Grant No. FDC 25-274. This research also benefited from a Population Center's Grant from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (HD05876) to the Center for Demography and Ecology.

Abstract

Recent studies indicate that single mothers experience unusually high levels of psychological distress. Several explanations have been given to account for this relationship including the arguments that: (1) single mothers are exposed to more stressful life events and more ongoing strain, (2) single mothers are more vulnerable to stressful events and strain, and (3) women who become single mothers are less healthy to begin with. Longitudinal data taken from the Michigan Panel Study of Income Dynamics are used to test each of these hypotheses. The results indicate that the high level of distress among single mothers is due primarily to the ongoing strain associated with low income.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of family status in determining the psychological well-being of persons in the United States has become increasingly apparent over the last decade. In particular, the status of single mother has been identified as a powerful predictor of poor mental health, as measured by a variety of indicators. Epidemiological surveys, for example, show that single mothers report lower levels of self-satisfaction and higher levels of anxiety and depression than persons living in two-parent households. Health facility statistics also indicate that female householders make greater use of community mental health services than other subgroups in the population (Guttentag et al., 1980).

There are several possible explanations for why single mothers experience more psychological distress than other subgroups. First, the prevalence of poor mental health may be due to differences in life style and living conditions. Researchers have noted that households headed by single mothers are exposed to more stressful life events and more ongoing strain in the form of low income than households headed by married couples (McLanahan, 1983; Brandewein et al., 1974; Schoor and Moen, 1979; Ross and Sawhill, 1973; Espenshade, 1979). Since stressful events and chronic strain are also predictors of psychological distress, it can be argued that greater exposure to strain and events may account for difference in well-being between the two family types.

Second, there is reason to suspect that differential vulnerability to stressful life conditions may account for the higher levels of distress that exist among single mothers. That is, given the same level of exposure to stressful situations, single mothers may respond more

negatively to events than married men and women. In this vein, Pearlin and Johnson (1977) have shown that the effects of strain are stronger among non-married adults, whereas Kessler (1979) has argued that females in general are more susceptible to stressful events than males. Since single mothers are at greater risk on both accounts, it is reasonable to expect that their reactions to stress are more negative than those of other subgroups.

Finally, some have argued that mental health differences across family types are due to selection processes that govern the distribution of people among marital status categories. According to this view, healthy persons are more likely to marry and remain in nuclear families while the unhealthy are more likely to divorce and not remarry. As a consequence, the mental health of those in the non-married category should be lower on average than that of married adults at any point in time.

The purpose of this paper is to compare these explanations for why single mothers have higher levels of psychological distress. Four specific hypotheses are tested:

1. The psychological well-being of single mothers, relative to married parents, declines over time.
2. Changes in psychological status are related to the incidence and prevalence of life events and chronic strain.
3. Single mothers respond more negatively to life events and strain than married parents.
4. Greater exposure to stressful event and chronic strain can account for the relative decline in psychological well-being among single mothers over time.

The first hypothesis is designed to test the selection effect. The second and third examine the direct and interaction effects of stress and

chronic strain on well-being. And the fourth hypothesis examines the overall power of the stress hypothesis as an explanation for the relatively poor mental health of single mothers.

METHODS

The Data

The data used in this study were taken from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), a national representative sample of 5,000 American households followed since 1968. The Panel consists of a subset of approximately 2000 low-income households drawn from the Census Bureau's Survey of Economic Opportunity and a fresh probability sample of approximately 3,000 additional households taken from the Survey Research Center's National sampling frame. The low-income sample contains a large proportion of female-headed households which makes the PSID especially useful for research on different family forms. (Weights are included to adjust for the oversampling of low-income families.)

The unit of analysis in the PSID is the household, and the interview questions are addressed to the household head. Due to conventional census practice at the time of the initial interview, households containing married couples were designated as male-headed whereas households containing single adults were designated male or female-headed, depending on the sex of the respondent. This results in the confounding of sex and marital status in that all married respondents are male whereas single respondents are both male and female.

Since single males and females who live alone differ dramatically with respect to demographic characteristics and since my primary interest is on single mothers, I have excluded non-parents of both sexes from the sample and have restricted my comparison to two family types: one-parent families where the respondent is a single female and two-parent families where the respondent is a married male. This design creates one serious limitation for the analyses described below. If single mothers are found to be more susceptible to stress than married fathers (hypothesis #3), it will not be clear whether greater vulnerability is due to being single or to being female. Both factors have been shown to be positively related to vulnerability. If on the other hand, there are no differences in the susceptibility of married fathers and single mothers, the confounding would not present a problem. In fact, a finding of 'no differences' would be quite informative inasmuch as it would provide evidence against both hypotheses: the vulnerability of women and the vulnerability of non-married persons. A comparison of the two groups can also be justified on the grounds that there is a need for good descriptive information on the experiences of single mothers and the PSID data are well-suited for this purpose. They contain an unusually large sample of low-income respondents (single mothers), and they provide information on changes in household and economic status over time.

For the present study, observations on each household from years 1968 to 1981 were pooled to create a cross-sectional sample containing four years of information on each respondent. The pooling allows us to maximize the use of available information (in particular the yearly information on the incidence of life events) as each respondent is represented

by as many observations as there are complete pairs on dependent and independent variables in years t and t + 1, where t ranges from 1968 to 1971. From the pooled data a subsample was formed consisting of households with children 18 and under who live at home. Families headed by single males were excluded from the analysis because of the small number of cases in this category. Respondents who divorced or remarried between years t and t + 1 were also excluded inasmuch as we could not observe changes in well-being for women who experienced these events. The final sample contained approximately 6331 married fathers and approximately 2152 single mothers, including women who were never married, divorced, separated and widowed. It should be noted that the 8483 observations are not all stochastically independent, and thus the pooling may result in the underestimation of standard errors. In the present case, since the sample of respondents is quite large and the number of periods pooled is small, I have not attempted to adjust for the possibility of autocorrelated errors.

Variables

Chronic Life Strain. A number of studies have shown that demographic characteristics such as low income, poor education, race and family size are negatively related to mental health and well-being (Pearlin and Johnson, 1977; Leim and Leim, 1978; Radloff and Rae, 1979; Glenn and Weaver, 1979). Most of these variables proceed family status in time, and therefore they may be viewed as measures of predisposing factors that govern selection into and out of different family types. They may also be viewed as indicators of current strain arising from economic

hardship, lack of employment opportunity and discrimination. Since the present analysis focuses on changes in well-being rather than well-being itself, a stronger argument can be made for treating the demographic variables as indicators of current strain rather than as measures of predisposing traits. This is due to the fact that unmeasured traits--associated with well-being are presumably picked up (and controlled for) in the time one indicator of well-being. In the following analyses, income is measured as total family income, education is measured as years of school completed, race is measured as black (1) versus non-black (0) and family size is measured as number of children in the family.

Life Events. Life event variables are based on the occurrence or non-occurrence of an event during the past year. In some cases events are defined by the respondent's report of whether a change occurred. In other cases they are defined by observed changes in the demographic characteristics of the respondent. The events used here were adapted from an inventory created by Duncan and Morgan (1980) for use with the PSID data set. Life events include changes in a variety of areas such as financial status, employment status, household composition, place of residence, and health. The event variables are defined and scored as follows:

Unemployment. Event scored 1 if respondent's annual hours unemployed (including on strike) exceeded 174 (approximately one month of work days); otherwise scored 0.

Voluntary job change. Event scored 1 if respondent had changed jobs and gave one of the following reasons: (a) quit, (b) previously self-employed, (c) resigned, (d) retired, or (e) became pregnant; otherwise scored 0.

Involuntary job change. Event scored 1 if respondent had changed jobs and gave as a reason: (1) company went out of business, (b) on strike, or (c) laid off; otherwise scored 0.

Work loss due to sickness. Event scored 1 if respondent missed more than 20 days of work.

Increase in family income. Event scored 1 if present income was more than 50% greater than past year's income.

Decrease in family income. Event scored 1 if present income was more than 50% less than past year's income.

Move-in of household. Event scored 1 if a child moved into the family unit during the past year.

Move-out of household. Event scored 1 if a child moved out of the family unit during the past year.

Voluntary residential move. Event scored 1 if respondent had moved during the last year and gave one of the following reasons: (a) to take another job or get nearer work, (b) more or less space, less rent, better neighborhood, better house, or (c) to save money, or old neighbors moved away.

Involuntary residential move. Event scored 1 if respondent had moved during the last year and answered that the move was due to outside events such as eviction, divorce, health, or armed services.

Exit labor force. Event scored 1 if respondent was in the labor force last year and was currently not in the labor force.

Enter labor force. Event scored 1 if respondent was not in the labor force last year and was currently working or looking for work.

Disability. Event scored 1 if respondent was not limited in the amount or kind of work s(he) could do last year and was currently limited.

Increase work time. Event scored 1 if work time increased by more than 500 hours during the past year.

Decrease work time. Event scored 1 if work time decreased by more than 500 hours during the past year; otherwise scored 0.

Total events. Sum of all events that occurred during the past year (maximum score is 14).

Psychological Status. Although the PSID Study was not concerned directly with psychological well-being or mental health, it did include for a five year period (1968 to 1972) a number of questions that can be used as indicators of well-being. In the present analysis, psychological

well-being is defined as feeling efficacious about one's life and is measured by a three-item scale based on the following questions:

1. "When you make plans, do you usually carry things out the way you expected or do things come up to make you change your plans?"

2. "Have you usually felt pretty sure your life would work out the way you want it to, or have there been times when you haven't been very sure about it?"

3. "Would you say you nearly always finish things once you start them or do you sometimes have to give up before they are finished?"

This scale has been shown to correlate with the Rotter Locus of Control Scale (Rotter, 1966; Gurin, et al., 1978) and has been used in a number of studies based on the PSID data. (See Lachman, 1983; Duncan and Liker, 1983; Augustyniak, et al., 1982; Corcoran et al., 1983; McLanahan and Sørensen, 1984).

Analytic Techniques

The main part of the analysis is based on a model of the following type:

$$(1) \qquad WB_{t2} = b_0 + b_1 WB_{t1} + b_2 FS + b_3 Z$$

where WB measures well-being at time two and time one, FS is an indicator of family status (single mother = 1, married father = 0) and Z is a set of independent variables. This model is a lagged model. If WB_{t1} is subtracted from both sides of the equation, it can be seen that all coefficients except for the coefficient for WB_{t1} remain unchanged. Hence they may be interpreted as measures of the effect of the various independent variables on well-being at time two, net of their effect on well-being at time one. Interpreted in this manner, the model reflects an

assumption that change is dependent on the level of well-being at time one. This assumption has two justifications. Measurement error in the indicators of distress will produce a regression toward the mean when change is the dependent variable. This regression toward the mean will result in misleading inferences concerning the effect of independent variables that are correlated with well-being at time one unless the latter variable is controlled. In addition, the control for well-being at time one will capture unmeasured variables that influence the initial level of well-being, in particular those correlated with the main independent variables of interest: events and strain.

SOCIAL SELECTION AND FAMILY STATUS DIFFERENCES IN WELL-BEING

The first step in the analysis was to test the hypothesis that single motherhood has an impact on psychological well-being, net of its association with pre-selection status. The logic behind the selection argument is quite simple: individuals with psychological problems are more likely to divorce and less likely to remarry. Thus, the relationship between family status and poor mental health is due not to differences arising from the state of single parenthood (e.g., social and economic disadvantage) but rather to factors that determine entrances and exits from that status.

In survey research, individuals are not randomly assigned to marital status categories, and therefore the selection hypothesis can never be rejected conclusively. Nevertheless, the longitudinal data offer a way of testing at least one version of the selection argument: that differences in single mothers and married fathers are due entirely to

differences that pre-date marital disruption or that result from the selective attrition of healthier women out of the single mother status. With the PSID data, we can observe changes in individual well-being over time, and therefore we can determine if the psychological status of single mothers declines relative to married fathers over time (i.e., while they occupy the single parent status). To test this argument, we used equation [illegible], to estimate the effects of family status (single mothers versus married father) on changes in well-being between time 1 and time 2. If selection accounts for all of the difference between single mothers and married fathers, than the FS coefficient should have no additional effect on well-being, net of its effect on well-being at time 1. Results of this test are reported below in Table 1.[1]

The findings reported in Table 1 show that the effect of family status is negative and significant. The family coefficient can be interpreted as meaning that the well-being of single mothers declines by .45 over a one year period relative to married fathers. Since the range of the well-being scale is from 1 to 5, a .45 change represents approximately a 11% decline in relative well-being which is quite substantial for a one year period. This finding suggests that at least some of the relative disadvantage of single mothers observed in cross sectional studies is due to changes in psychological status that occur subsequent to the formation of female-headed families. The following analyses will attempt to account for some of those changes.

Table 1

The Effect of Family Status on Changes in Well-Being Over a One Year Period

Independent Variables	Unstandardized Coefficients
Constant	.47
Well-being (time 1)	.54* (.010)
Family status[a]	-.45* (.035)
R^2	.33

Standard errors are reported in parentheses.

[a]Family status is coded 1 = single mother, 0 = married father.

THE EFFECT OF LIFE EVENTS AND CHRONIC STRAIN

The next step in the study was to examine the effects of life events and chronic strain on changes in psychological well-being. Two hypotheses were tested here:

1. Life events and chronic strain are related to negative changes in well-being, and

2. Single mothers repond more negatively to events and chronic strain than married fathers.

The tests were based on the following equations:

$$(2) \qquad WB_{t2} = b_0 + b_1 WB_{t1} + b_2 FS + b_3 ST + e$$

$$(3) \qquad WB_{t2} = b_0 + b_1 WB_{t1} + b_2 FS + b_3 ST + b_4 FSxSt + e$$

where WB measures psychological well-being at times one and two, FS measures family status, ST represents a set of stress indicators (life events and chronic strain) and FSxST represents the interaction of stress with family status. The b_4 coefficient can be interpreted as measuring the additional effect of an event or a particular strain for single mothers. Results from this portion of the analysis are reported in Table 2.

The first column in Table 2 reports the effect of each event and each measure of strain on changes in well-being.[2] According to these estimates, nearly all of the events are related to decreases in well-being, and most of them are statistically significant. The largest effects are associated with unemployment, entrances into the labor force, involuntary residential moves and poor health (illness and disability). All of the chronic strain coefficients are significant and all have negative consequences for well-being. These results are consistent with hypothesis

Table 2

The Effect of Life Events and Chronic Strain on Changes in Well-Being Among Married Fathers and Single Mothers

Independent Variable	Model 2	Model 3	
		direct efforts	interaction efforts
Major Life Events			
Unemployment	-.24* (.04)	-.37* (.15)	.11 (.12)
Leave labor force	-.18* (.08)	-.18 (.25)	.003 (.17)
Voluntary job change	-.09* (.04)	-.17 (.16)	.07 (.14)
Involuntary job change	-.11 (.06)	-.15 (.27)	.04 (.25)
Increase work hours	-.06* (.03)	-.10 (.13)	.03 (.11)
Decrease work hours	-.08* (.03)	-.30* (.14)	.20 (.13)
Illness	-.22* (.05)	-.65* (.19)	.39* (.16)
Increase family income	-.12* (.04)	.13 (.11)	-.21* (.09)
Decrease family income	-.09* (.04)	-.23* (.13)	.16 (.11)
Enter labor force	-.25* (.09)	.35 (.27)	.07 (.18)
Move-in children	-.09* (.03)	-.02 (.11)	-.06 (.09)
Move-out children	-.02 (.04)	-.32* (.12)	.29* (.10)
Voluntary residential move	-.02 (.03)	-.04 (.12)	.01 (.10)
Involuntary residential move	-.37* (.06)	-.95* (.20)	.45* (.15)
Disability	-.17* (.01)	.27 (.16)	.09 (.13)
Total events score	-.07* (.01)	-.12* (.03)	.05* (.02)
Well-being T_1	a	a	
Family Status	a	a	
Chronic Life Strains			
Low education	-.05* (.01)	-.09* (.02)	.01 (.02)
Number of children	-.02* (.01)	-.08* (.03)	.05* (.02)
Low income (in ten thousands)	-.21* (.00)	-.40* (.00)	.01 (.01)
Low income^2 (in millions)	.03* (.00)	.03* (.00)	b
Being black	-.21* (.04)	-.54* (.11)	.17* (.08)
Well-being T_1	.50* (.01)	.52* (.01)	
Family Status	.30* (.04)	.50* (.07)	
R^2	.34	.34	

Standard errors are reported in parentheses.

[a]Coefficients for events are estimated in separate equations, controlling for well-being at Time 1 and family status. In Model 2 well-being T_1 coefficients range from .51 to .54 and family status coefficients range from .43 to .49.

[b]Interaction not estimated.

1. which states that the incidence of events and the presence of chronic strain are related to declines in well-being over time.

Columns 2 and 3 contain the estimates based on equation (3). The "a" column reports the main effect of stress and the "b" column reports the additional effect for single mothers who are exposed to events and strain.

According to the coefficients in columns a and b, very few of the interaction effects are significant which suggests that responses to events and chronic strain are similar for single mothers and married fathers. Of particular note is the finding that single mothers are less negatively affected by the presence of children than married males. One might have expected the burdens of parenthood to be greater for single mothers because of their lack of resources. This finding may reflect sex differences in the response to children rather than marital status differences, in which case the results are consistent with past studies will show that the effects of children are generally more negative for males than for females (Glenn and McLanahan, 1981).[3] The race interaction is also negative which suggests that being a single mother is less stressful for black women than for whites.

Because of the small number of significant interactions and the overrepresentation of employment-related changes, it would be premature to argue at this time that married fathers are "more vulnerable" than single mothers. However, the findings do suggest that to the extent that stress-related factors are responsible for the relative declines in well-being among single mothers, their impact is due to the higher incidence and prevalence of stressful conditions rather than to the greater vulnerability of the mothers.

It should also be noted that the well-being indicator used in this study is different from the more commonly used measures of psychological distress. Thus, the finding that single mothers are no more susceptible to events and strain than married fathers may apply only to changes in efficacy rather than to other areas of psychological well-being. On the other hand, since these findings are based on longitudinal data whereas past studies are usually cross-sectional, the findings here might also be due to differences in study designs. Further research with longitudinal data is necessary in order to sort out the sources of discrepancy between the results presented here and in other studies.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE STRESS EXPLANATION

Having determined that events and strain are related to changes in well-being, the final step in the analysis was to test the hypothesis that life events and chronic strain can account for the relative decline in psychological well-being among single mothers over time. To answer this question, I added the indicators of strain and life events to equation (1), using a stepwise regression procedure. The change in the family status coefficient was used to evaluate the importance of stressful events and chronic strain in accounting for family status effects. Results are reported in Table 3.

Column 1 presents the effect of family status obtained from the model including only family status and well-being at time one. Column 2 reports the effects of family status after the event variables were added, and column 3 reports the estimates based on the model including events and chronic strain. According to column 2, life events alone

Table 3

The Importance of Stress Factors in Explaining the Relationship between Family Status and Changes in Well-Being

Independent Variables	Reduced Model	Reduced Model plus Events	Reduced Model plus Events and Strain
Constant	.47	.42	.91
$Well\text{-}being_{t1}$	.54* (.01)	.53* (.01)	.49* (.01)
Family status	-.45* (.04)	-.43* (.04)	-.28* (.04)
Total events score		-.08* (.01)	-.06* (.01)
Low education			-.05* (.01)
Low income (in ten thousands)			-.21* (.00)
Low income^2 (in millions)			.03* (.01)
Being black			-.20* (.04)
Number of children			-.02* (.01)
R^2	.333	.339	.357

Standard errors are reported in parentheses.

account for very little of the relative decline in well-being among single mothers. The family status coefficient, which is .45 in column 1, is reduced to .43 in column 2 which is less than a 10% reduction in the family effect. This indicates that although single mothers experience more events and although events have negative consequences, the incidence of events accounts for very little of the overall decline in well-being. Several factors may be operating to reduce the importance of stressful events. First, the events examined here are quite rare, and thus their ability to account for changes in psychological status is limited. While a more complete set of events than are observable with these data might improve the explanatory power of the event variable, the incidence of events would probably still be too low to explain much of the variation in well-being. More importantly, the use of a one year lag model in this analysis restricts event effects to psychological changes that occur in the same year in which the event is experienced. If the impact of unemployment or residential moves, for example, has a longer lag period, or if it is the new state that is stressful rather than the transition into the state, than the model used here will underestimate the impact of events on well-being over time.

Column 3 reports the coefficient for family status after adding the chronic strain variables to the model. According to these estimates, ongoing strain accounts for a large proportion of the family effect, as indicated by the drop from .43 to .28 in the final column. Most of this reduction is due to current income which alone accounts for 33% of the reduction in the family effect. Race, education and number of children explain an additional 4% of the family status differences. (Based on analysis not reported in Table 3.) This last finding lends considerable

support to the hypothesis that ongoing strain is responsible for a good deal of the relative decline in psychological well-being among single mothers over time.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The present study was designed to test several hypotheses regarding the relationship between family status and psychological well-being. Two of the hypotheses received at least some support and two were clearly rejected.

The first hypothesis stated that family status is related to changes in psychological well-being over time. This hypothesis is central to the issue of whether the high levels of psychological distress observed among single mothers in cross-sectional studies are due to pre-existing differences that determine selection into single motherhood, or whether some of the relative disadvantage is due to situational factors that result from being in the status of single parent. To test the latter argument, I estimated an equation that defined future well-being as a function of present well-being and present family status. According to this logic, if differences were due entirely to selection factors, being a single mother should have no effect on future well-being, net of its association with current psychological status. The results reported here indicate that single mothers experience a substantial decline (about 11%) in well-being over a one year period which is consistent with the argument that the current living conditions of single mothers are at least partly responsible for the difference in well-being observed among different family types.

The second and third hypotheses stated that life events and strain are related to changes in well-being and that the effects of stress are greater among single mothers than among married fathers. This portion of the study showed that chronic strain and life events are clearly associated with declines in well-being and that the impact of stress is essentially the same for married fathers and single mothers. The later finding is contrary to the original hypothesis and rather surprising in that past studies suggest that single mothers should be more susceptible to stress on two accounts: because they are female and because they are single. Unfortunately, since this study differs from past work with respect to its measure of well-being as well as its design, the results presented here must be viewed as tentative.

The final portion of the study looked at whether or not the higher incidence and greater prevalence of events and chronic strain could account for the relative decline in well-being of single mothers over time. The findings indicate that events alone account for very little of the decline, whereas chronic strain accounts for nearly 40% of the difference. Of particular note is the finding that low income alone explains nearly 33% of the family status effect. This is especially important from a policy point of view because income levels can be manipulated more readily than education, race or number of children. Moreover, low income can be viewed in part as a consequence of divorce. Research shows that on average white women experience a $7,000 loss in income subsequent to marital disruption whereas black women experience a $5,000 loss (Hofman, 1978).

In sum, the results suggest that policies aimed at raising the income of single mothers not only would improve conditions for children in

single parent houseolds but also would enhance the mental health status of single mothers. Such improvements could be achieved in a variety of ways: either by policies aimed at increasing the labor force participation and earnings of working mothers (e.g., child care, comparable worth, etc.), or through programs designed to redistribute some of the economic burden that single mothers now carry (e.g., childrens' allowances or child support).

Notes

[1]The longitudinal data do not allow us to reject a more complex version of the selection hypothesis: that the relationship between family status and well-being is due to an unmeasured variable that affects both propensity to divorce and propensity to experience declines in well-being.

[2]Event effects are estimated in seperate equations to minimize the loss of degress of freedom. Since the correlation among events is quite low... less than .20 for unemployment, involuntary job changes and decreases in work hours, less than .10 for other events... the coefficients for events should be unbiased estimates.

[3]Although the state of parenthood is apparently more stressful for fathers, the exit of a child from the household also has negative consequences for married males. Since the sample is limited to fathers who do not divorce or remarry during the observation period, the "moveout" effect is not likely to result from "off-time" transitions or family disruptions. A possible explanation of the apparent contradiction is that the strain effect reflects sex differences in the response to children, whereas the event effect reflects marital status differences. In other words, although parenthood is less stressful for females, the departure of children may be less stressful for single parents. Clearly further analysis based on data that include married mothers is needed before this disparity can be resolved.

References

Augustyniak, S., G. Duncan, and J. K. Liker. 1982. "Income dynamics and self-conceptions: linking theory and method in models of change." Unpublished manuscript.

Brandwein, R. A., C. A. Brown and E. M. Fox. 1974. "Women and children last: the social situation of divorced mothers and their families." Journal of Marriage and the Family (August): 498-514.

Corcoran, M., G. Duncan and P. Gurin. 1983. "Psychological and demographic aspects of the underclass." Unpublished manuscript.

Espenshade, T. J. 1979. "The economic consequences of divorce." Journal of Marriage and the Family (August): 615-625.

Glenn, N. D. and S. S. McLanahan. 1981. "The effects of offspring on the psychological well-being of older adults." Journal of Marriage and the Family (May): 409-421.

Gurin, P., G. Gurin and S. M. Morrison. 1978. "Personal and ideological aspects of internal and external control." Social Psychology, 41: 275-296.

Guttentag, M., S. Salasin and D. Belle. 1980. The Mental Health of Women. New York: Academic Press.

Hoffman, S. 1977. "Marital instability and the economic status of women." Demography (February): 67-76.

Kessler, R. C. 1979. "A strategy for studying the differential vulnerability to the psychological consequences of stress." Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 20 (June): 100-19.

Lachman, M. 1984. "Personal efficacy in middle and old age: differential and normative patterns of change." Life Course Dynamics from 1968 to 1980. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press (forthcoming).

McLanahan, S. S. 1983. "Family structure and stress: a longitudinal comparison of two-parent and female-headed families." Journal of Marriage and the Family (May): 347-57.

McLanahan, S. and A. B. Sørensen. 1984. "Life events and psychological well-being: a re-examination of theoretical and methodological issues." Social Science Research, 13; 111-128.

Schoor, A. and R. Moen. 1980. "The single parent and public policy." Pp. 554-565 in Family in Transition, Skolnick and Skolnick (eds.). Boston: Little, Brown & Co.

Pearlin, L. I. and J. S. Johnson. 1977. "Marital status, life-strains and depression." American Sociological Review, 42 (October): 704-715.

Ross, H. L. and I. V. Sawhill. 1975. Time of Transition: The Growth of Families Headed by Women. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute.

Rotter, J. B. 1966. "Generalized expectancies for internal versus external control of reinforcement." Psychological Monographs, 80 (1, Whole No. 609).